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### Success seen in Mineral Creek cleanup

But can efforts be equaled in Cement Creek?



Photo by: JERRY

McBRIDE/Durango Herald

From left, Chris Peltz, scientist, Kirsten Brown, with the Department of Reclamation and Mine Safety, and Bill Simon, a co-coordinator of the Animas River Stakeholders Group, work below the San Antonio Mine and near the Congress Mine near Red Mountain Pass. The group was in the reclaimed area to collect soil and plant samples.

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By Chase Olivarius-Mcallister Herald staff writer

SILVERTON – Many people point to the Animas River Stakeholders Group's progress in cleaning up Mineral Creek as a sign that its collaborative process works, and the Environmental Protection Agency need not pursue listing Cement Creek, one of the biggest untreated mine drainages in Colorado, as a Superfund site.

In the 1990s, Mineral Creek was a major source of the metal pollution flowing into the Animas River. But that was before Sunnyside Gold Corp. and the stakeholders began remediation efforts in Mineral Creek. It was also before Cement Creek's pollution ramped up after Sunnyside Gold Corp. placed a series of bulkheads in the American Tunnel starting in 1996. This caused the water table to rise within the mountain and

metals to drain out of abandoned mines higher up the mountain.

Water quality has steadily improved since remediation efforts began in 1996, said Bill Simon, an Animas River Stakeholders co-coordinator. There has been about a 50 percent reduction in zinc concentrations and a 70 percent reduction in copper concentrations during low flow.

"It's not exactly precise to say we've 'cleaned up' Mineral Creek," said Peter Butler, co-coordinator of the stakeholders group. "The water is by no means drinkable right now. But, scientifically, we have met our goals there."

San Juan County Commissioner Peter McKay praised the stakeholders group's work improving water quality in Mineral Creek, saying it was all the more remarkable given that the group's environmental efforts are legally hamstrung: Without the passage of "good Samaritan" legislation, he said, the group always runs the risk of taking on legal liability for the pollution it wants to clean up.

He said Mineral Creek is somewhat comparable to Cement Creek because both Animas tributaries are naturally heavily mineralized.

La Plata County Commissioner Gwen Lachelt said whatever comes of efforts in Cement Creek, the stakeholders' achievement in Mineral Creek was "deeply impressive."

Butler and Simon agreed that Mineral Creek's cleanup was environmentally important, but said it scientifically amounted to low-hanging fruit.

The effort primarily involved removing or treating metal waste from around the riverbed, "which is a lot easier and less expensive than treating water draining from mines," said Butler, describing the situation in Cement Creek.

Simon also said that while he is very proud of the group's work in Mineral Creek, it was never the biggest part of the solution to the metal pollution of the Animas River.

Simon and Butler said Mineral Creek only ever accounted for about 25 percent of the pollution flowing into the Animas River, versus the 75 percent (and growing) they attribute to Cement Creek.

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